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ABSTRACT

A foreign language segment was integrated into the exploratory curriculum of the sixth grade in Marion, Indiana's middle schools. The overall course offers nine-week segments in home economics, industrial arts, computer literacy, and foreign language, introducing the children to curricular areas they may select later in middle school. In the language segment, French, German, and Spanish teachers each teach for two weeks in their specialty languages and for one week each in the other two languages. The teachers are expected to learn the two nonspecialty languages as the children do. A comprehensive teaching guide was prepared for the course, and the unit format is an imaginary trip to a foreign country. Course objectives are to explore language similarities, see some career and life situations in which linguistic knowledge is of value, broaden cultural awareness, motivate students for future language study, promote familiarity with the language learning process, improve study and listening skills, improve vocabulary, and foster positive language and cultural attitudes. (MSE)

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9 The Exploratory Wheel: A Foreign Language Program for the Middle School

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The concept of the Exploratory Wheel for sixth-grade students was developed by the teachers and administrative staff who designed the Marion Community Schools' Middle School curriculum. State guidelines and requirements leave little room in the student's day for enrichment or elective studies. While we may hope to see the day when learning another language will be as routine for all students as learning to multiply and divide or studying the Civil War, that day has not yet arrived in Marion, Indiana. However, the concept of the Exploratory Wheel does expose every student to various facets of language learning and to the importance of language as a means of communication.

The Exploratory Wheel has four segments or spokes: Home Economics, Industrial Arts, Computer Literacy, and Foreign Language. All sixth grade students in each of the three middle schools are divided into four groups. Each of the four spoke areas is studied by one group at a time and these groups are rotated like a wheel. Each spoke is nine weeks long and introduces students to four different curricular areas that they will have the opportunity to select later in the middle school experience. Each nine weeks, the student moves to a new spoke on the Wheel. With only nine weeks of study, the scope of the course must be confined to what is practical and possible to accomplish within the time limit.

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The Foreign Language Wheel

The Foreign Language Wheel was designed by the foreign language teachers of Marion County Schools under the direction of the Administrative Assistant to the Superintendent and Director of Secondary Schools.[1] The course is not meant to be a formal introduction to the language but rather an experience that will build a readiness for learning a language at a later time. In this school district, later means that a student may presently complete level one of French, German, or Spanish by electing one semester in the seventh grade and two semesters in the eighth, thus completing the first level of a language before entering the ninth grade. Students who begin their language study in the seventh grade can continue through a five-year sequence.

Although the developers of the course do not pretend to have written a perfect course, the product represents a workable guide that can be taught by teachers with a great diversity of experience, skills, and personal preference, while at the same time providing learning experiences that are consistently similar or equal in concept. In fact, staff members who have taught the course have made adaptations or have developed alternative activities to supplement or replace those contained in the original course materials. This process of evolution and modification of materials is viewed as a positive response to the differing needs and interests of individual teachers and students.

As a starting point, the following program goals were determined. These objectives were then used to develop the teacher's guide and student activities.

1. To explore similarities among languages and develop a greater awareness of English words and expressions derived from other languages.
2. To develop an understanding of some career and life situations in which the knowledge of a foreign language would be of value.
3. To broaden the student's cultural awareness and build an understanding of the similarities and differences in various cultures.
4. To motivate an interest in future language study.
5. To establish a familiarity with the language learning process.
6. To improve study skills, listening skills, and vocabulary.

7. To foster a positive attitude toward and appreciation for others whose cultural background differs from one's own.

Introductions to actual language learning experiences were based on the three modern languages taught in our school system—French, German, and Spanish. The course includes short one-week units and longer two-week units in each language. The short units are referred to in the guide as Nonbuilding Language, and the longer units as Building Language, on the assumption that one teacher would teach all of the sections at any one school. The French teacher will teach one week of Nonbuilding Spanish and German and two weeks of Building French in one school; in another school the Spanish teacher includes Nonbuilding French and German and Building Spanish. Building Language indicates that the teacher is teaching the languages in which he or she has been trained; nonbuilding refers to a language that the teacher may not know or knows less well.

How then does a German teacher manage to teach French and Spanish, and a Spanish teacher teach French and German? Operating upon the premise that we learn at least what we expect our students to learn, we share with the students that this language is something that we are all going to learn about together. Tapes have been prepared to model the few short utterances used in the course and the teacher becomes a student with the rest of the class. Students can accept that a teachers does not know everything without losing respect for the teacher's authority in the classroom. They can appreciate that a teacher who expects *them* to learn is also able to learn.

In spite of the overall success of the program, some problems have arisen. For example, an ongoing difficulty for the staff is that they are not assigned to a permanent room that allows for rearranging furniture or for creating the "cultural island" that would provide a more intense immersion experience for the student. A lack of available audiovisual equipment necessary for implementing activities suggested in the lesson plans has also been problematic. Although these problems are not insurmountable, teachers planning similar programs should enlist a commitment from school administrators to provide necessary space and equipment.

The Teacher's Guide

Although the compiled teacher's course guide seems overwhelming, it was important to the staff to provide such complete suggestions, lesson plans, and useful background information that a first-year teacher just out of college would be able to teach the course. Most teachers have textbooks, travel experiences in countries where the target language is spoken, classroom expertise developed through years of trial and error, and materials and realia. A first-year teacher, however, could conceivably enter the Wheel classroom without materials or textbooks. Much of the material in the guide's appendix sections is not intended for student use, but as research and source material to familiarize the teacher with the concepts to be taught. The completeness of the course guide and the explicit directions found in it are not meant to inhibit the teacher's creativity but to provide an initial basis for confidence. It is not intended to restrict teachers from drawing upon their own experience and expertise, but rather to be a source of strengthening the developing of those qualities.

Keeping in mind that all sixth grade students take this course and that there is no ability groupings, the lesson plans attempt to include simple activities understandable to the slowest students and suggestions for optional activities that challenge the gifted. Quizzes and tests were developed with consideration of the same opposite ends of the spectrum. Building in success experiences for the slow or nonmotivated student, while stretching and challenging the student with the quick, inquiring mind, continues to be a concern to the teachers in this program.

Scope and Sequence

The Wheel course is based on the following scope and sequence, which represents eight weeks of instruction, allowing one week's time for interruptions or for more time on any unit as needed.

Week 1	Unit I:	Word Borrowing and Foreign Language in Indiana
Week 2	Unit II:	Nonverbal Communication
Week 3	Unit III:	Animal and Human Communication
	Unit IV:	Getting a Passport
Week 4	Units V, VII, or IX:	Nonbuilding Language

Week 5 Units V, VII, or IX:	Nonbuilding Language
Week 6 Units VI, VIII, or X:	Building Language
Week 7 Units VI, VIII, or X:	Continue Building Language
Week 8 Unit XI:	Languages of the World in the World of Your Future

Although the preliminary exercises in recognizing various aspects of communicative means and skills before introducing actual language learning experiences seemed logical, students expressed consistently some impatience and eagerness to experience actual foreign language. Teachers, therefore, experimented with changing the order of the units, interspersing the Nonbuilding Units of one week throughout the others, but ending with the two-week Building Language Unit (a more extensive immersion experience) and the Languages of the World Unit. This sequence seems to be more successful in maintaining student interest and enthusiasm.

The unit entitled "Word Borrowing and Foreign Languages" draws the student's attention to the rich and varied ethnic background of the state of Indiana. A map study of town and city names points out the nationality pockets that developed as ethnic groups built their own communities. Students are asked to think of things they use and foods they eat that come from another culture.

In the unit on nonverbal communication, activities help students become aware of ways in which we communicate other than through words or sounds. They work with gestures and learn that some gestures may send out different signals in different cultures and also that other nonverbal signs are universal.

The "Animal and Human Communication" unit explores the basic need of living creatures to communicate. The students discuss ways that animals communicate with humans and with each other. They are introduced to concepts of "talking drums," of sign language, of written communication, and of transmitting messages.

Before the French or Spanish Nonbuilding Units, the one-day lesson unit on "Getting a Passport" should be taught. Students are asked to complete a simulated passport so that they learn about passport procedures, why they are necessary, and how they are used. The students may use an actual photograph, a magazine picture of a favorite star, sports figure, or other well-known person, or they may draw their "photograph." Some students enjoy embellishing the form and are very

creative in producing their passports. These passports are kept by students who use them in subsequent language units.

Trip formats are used as the primary activity format of both the one- and two-week language units, whether Building Language or Nonbuilding Language components. The two-week units contain additional enrichment activities (e.g., continental breakfasts or shopping trips) and provide more opportunity for language practice. The French and Spanish programs take imaginary trips to Paris and Madrid; one Spanish teacher has included a short visit to Mexico City before proceeding to Madrid because the most likely source of contacts for most students will be Mexicans or Mexican-Americans. The German unit introduces the student to West Germany rather than concentrating on a major city.

The French student materials for this unit are principally presented in a class set of booklets that the students do not keep. Spanish students, on the other hand, are instructed to save all handouts for the unit so that they have a completed booklet that they are allowed to keep. A checklist is provided in the teacher's guide for evaluating the completed notebook of the student.

Each language unit also includes a set of slides showing the places visited and lists other audiovisual aids—films, filmstrips, and videotapes that help bring these places to life for the student. Packets of realia at each building, which include real (expired) passports, airline tickets, subway tickets, bus tickets, etc., also lend an air of realism to the unit.

To begin the unit, students must first pass through customs where the teacher acts as the customs agent or appoints a student to do so. The passports prepared in the previous unit are stamped; students who forget to bring their passports may be confined to "immigration," a corner of the room, for the remainder of the class period.

After this initial introduction to the country in question, students complete a variety of learning activities. The Spanish materials include, for example, a blackline facsimile of an airline ticket to Madrid from New York City's Kennedy Airport. The lesson plan calls for a preflight briefing during which students ask for words or phrases that they think they might need to know (e.g., Where is the restaurant? Where is the restroom? How much does it cost?). Also included in the Spanish materials are copies of a description of the student's trip to Madrid in

English, but with basic Spanish vocabulary words included such as food items, meals, monetary terms.

Short, simple dialogues are also included in each of the language units and are recorded on tape for classroom use. The simplicity of the dialogues, as illustrated by the French example below, is in keeping with the exploratory nature of the program. Students can learn the vocabulary in these dialogues without difficulty and can learn to pronounce the words without undue frustration.

Greeting Dialogue. Write the dialogue below on the board. Teach the students the handshake that goes with the greeting. Discuss with the students the information about French greetings in the appendix.

Student 1: Bonjour, Monsieur. (Mademoiselle, Madame)
Student 2: Bonjour, Monsieur. Ça va?
Student 1: Oui, ça va. Merci.
Student 2: Voici l'autobus. Au revoir, Monsieur.
Student 1: Au revoir, Monsieur.

The final unit, *Languages of the World in the World of Your Future*, has the following objectives:

1. To explore the interdependence of countries
2. To explore the commonalities of language
3. To explore the varieties of language and those spoken by large numbers of people
4. To explore the career possibilities where a second language may be a principal or an ancillary skill
5. To explore the ways in which the study of another language can enrich and improve the quality of life

In this final unit, as in all the units, many "hands-on" and activity-centered methods are used. The main emphasis of this unit is to widen the student's focus on the world: how large it is and how widespread its peoples are. Also important is bringing the world closer to the student: how quickly an event in one part of the world can affect our own world; how dependent we are upon other peoples and countries, and they upon us; and how very different we may be, but at the same time, how very alike we are.

Conclusion

This article contains a "bare bones" description of the birth of an exploratory language and culture-oriented course for sixth-grade children. It attempts to be experience-based and activity-oriented, and to provide students with an exciting and unique opportunity to explore various languages. It is not meant to be a blueprint to be followed by any other school system in developing a similar course. Rather, it is hoped that it may simply provide a springboard for the staff of another school system to look at its own situation and consider some of the aspects discussed here. Any good course must be student-oriented, flexible, and adaptable to changing student populations, staff availability, and physical limitations. It must capitalize upon the uniqueness of the school personnel who create it, staff it, and administer it, and, above all, the students who are its audience.

Notes

1. The foreign language teachers are grateful for the competent guidance of Carol Secttor, Administrative Assistant to the Superintendent. They also owe a large debt of gratitude to Lorraine Strasheim of Indiana University whose expertise, direction, and suggestions for resources were invaluable in developing and implementing this program.